

## GENDER AND FOOD INSECURITY: FOOD ENTITLEMENT IN RESOURCE SCARCE AREAS IN THE FAR-WESTERN REGION OF NEPAL

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In spite of being the principal producers of food, women and child girls are often suffer from malnutrition and hunger. Most of the discussions regarding their food insecurity have focused so far on the intra-household access and distribution of food. This article analyzes the broader spectrum of gender dimensions of inter and intra-household entitlement to food. This study conducted in the far-western region of Nepal, which is established as a resource poor region, shows the institutions such as patrilinearity, patriarchal inheritance law, patrilocality and early marriage, the cultural norms, discriminatory food distributional practices, caste and ethnicity still function among some categories women in terms of land ownerships, share tenancy, acquiring sufficient and nutritious food, wage and employment, and credit, resulting their entitlement failure. At a time, this article discusses how new initiatives such as market, women's self-help agencies, Government's new policy and NGOs have been playing crucial role to change in the institutions that resulted into women's capability enhancement.

**Keywords:** Food security, gender, entitlement, institutions, resource scarcity, Nepal

### INTRODUCTION

Women and child girls are often forced into malnutrition and hunger in spite of the fact that they are principal agents of food production and distribution (Hazell and Haddad, 2001; Hadley *et al.*, 2008; UNICEF, 2010). Evidences around the world show that women suffer twice as much as men, and girls are more likely to die than boys from malnutrition (FAO, 2011; IFPRI, 2012).

In Nepal, women contribute about 80 percent of total agricultural activities (UNDP, 2009). Yet, they are unable to consume sufficient and nutritious food they needed (Adhikari and Bhole, 1999; Gills *et al.*, 2003). Twenty four percent among them have low body mass index which indicates a serious food nutrition problem among women (WFP/NPC, 2010). They also face numerous health problems caused by malnutrition.

Discussions regarding the food insecurity situations among women and child girls have so far focused primarily on inequality in intra-house food distribution. Harriss (1983) indicated that the women's productive contribution to family was lower than that of men and therefore, had little amount of food. Moreover, women in culture have been considered as the weaker section of family who required less food than men (Gittelsohn *et al.*, 1997). Such intra-societal and intra-household gender biases and discriminations in the sharing of food have been the major cause of their food insecurity (Kakwani, 1986; Dasgupta, 1987; Messer, 1997). These social taboos not only affected the food security situation of the women but also decreased their empowerment in leading household activities as in case of food purchasing decision where women were discouraged to go for it (Dreze and Sen, 1989). Similarly

they were found to be having in fewer opportunities of wage and employment (Kabeer, 1997). The household that preferred agricultural activities for their sustenance were not away from this bane as the women were in limited and fallback position within home because they had less share in land than men (Agrawal, 1994).

In addition to the social factors geographic situation was also reported to play its role as the dwellers of resource scarce areas were more vulnerable to food insecurity than of other areas (Mallik and Rafi, 2010; Nanama and Frongillo, 2012). Intra-household context highlighted more rigidity for institutions to function in the resource scarce areas than the other areas, so resources and institutions have been intra-related context (Kabeer, 2010; Kuku *et al.*, 2011). Likewise, the females belonging to the poverty stricken and socially excluded groups of the society were more vulnerable for hunger in Nepal than others (Adhikari and Ghimire, 2006). There have been few studies on; how women acquire food in resource scarce areas and what sorts of factors and institutions affect their food entitlement? Are the institution affects equally to all women from different social and economic background? How these institutions are changing, what are the major determinants of change and who are taking benefits from it? This research has a potential to address all the above mentioned questions in best possible way.

**Framework:** The study follows the entitlement framework developed by Amartya Sen in 1981. In that particular framework Sen signified the concept of endowments, entitlement and capabilities (Devereux, 2000). Individuals convert their resource endowment (Land and other natural resources, skills and education, health, agricultural inputs

etc.) into entitlement (income, health, education, social capitals) including food. These entitlements are acquired either through production and/or exchange through market (Sen, 1981) and/or through non-market exchange from their resource endowments (Agrawal, 1994; Kabeer, 1994). These entitlements are then transferred into wellbeing or capabilities (Alkire, 2005; Robeyns, 2005). In this regard food insecurity is actually the result of entitlement failure. The entitlement failure occurs when a person/group remains unable to acquire commodity bundles with enough food to survive (Dreze and Sen, 1989).

In addition, the paper adopted the theory and concept of institutions. The institutions including gender has decisive role for access to resource endowments (Leach *et al.*, 1999). The institutions are also concerned with how these affect people differently to gain entitlements from their resource endowment. In this way both formal and informal institutions have crucial role. Both formal institutions such as resource tenure, food policy, education, health, credit and informal institutions such as patri-linearity, patrilocality, eating practices, food discrimination, caste and ethnicity are main themes of the paper.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Study area:** This research was conducted in the far-western region (FWR) of Nepal (Figure-1) which is a resource scarce and food insecure region of the country, with around 90 percent of the households having insufficient access to food (WFP, 2008). While a large majority (76%) of highly food insecure people of the country are living in the region (WFP, 2010a).

The study area includes Mountain, Hill and Terai (flat land) physiographic areas. Major social groups in mountain and hill area are so called high caste such as *Brahmin*, *Chhetry* and *Thakuri* and low caste such as *Kami*, *Sarki* and *Damai* and in Terai, indigenous ethnic groups called *tharu*. The interactions among these social groups as well as between males and females in the region are strictly regulated by traditional institutions (Thieme *et al.*, 2011). This study attempts to analyze how diverse factors and institutions affect differently to the women from these different social groups.

NHDR (2009) states that the Gender Development Index (GDI) in the area lies in second lowest position in the country and the women living there consume the least amount of nutritious food than those women living in other parts of the country. In addition, the highest prevalence of female headed households is found in this region because almost all of the men migrated India during the resource scarce time, leaving the women and children at home to cope with limited access to food and resources (Lokshin and Glinskaya, 2008; WFP, 2010).

**Data collection:** The study was carried out in three Village Development Committees (VDCs), namely; Phulbari, Birpath and Brahahise of the Districts: Kailali, Achham and Bajura, respectively. The study used quantitative as well as

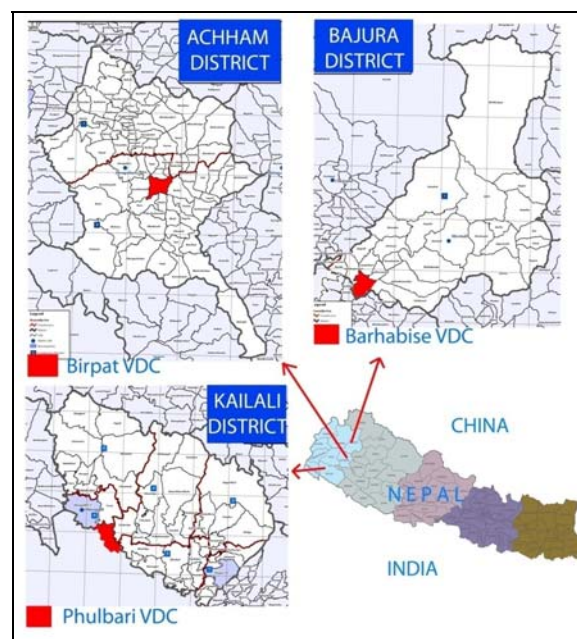


Figure 1: Research sites

qualitative methods of social science research. Household surveys of 370 households (seven percent of total research population) using stratified random sampling method were done. Of the total respondent there were 37% women who also bear the responsibility as a household head in the absence of their male counterpart. The study performed 32 in-depth Key Informant Interview (KII), 12 with women only informant and 21 Focus Group Discussions (FGD), 13 with only women's groups. To collect information, structured questionnaire for household survey, a checklist for KII and participatory tools such as ranking, timeline, Venn diagram, relationship, and resource mapping were used. Women key informants were invited during household survey and FGD to make enabling environment by which actual discussions on the gender issues could held.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Women's food entitlement:** The finding shows that wage labor/employment, land ownerships, practices of distribution of nutritious food and eating at household level, share tenancy and credit were major institutions which impacted on food entitlement of female members of the households in resource scarce areas in the far-western region of Nepal. Around 1/3<sup>rd</sup> respondent (35%) replied that lack of wage labor or job is the main factor which is responsible for the failure of their food entitlement (Table-1). In addition, 1/4<sup>th</sup> respondents from so called Dalit, high class and indigenous ethnic group reported that lack of land ownership for women is accountable for the food insecurity situation among them.

However, the impacts of these factors are different among diverse social context of women. Wage labor has more impacts on non-household head Dalit women. Distributions of nutritious food and eating practices have more impacts on

**Table 1: Factors affecting women's food entitlement**

Factors	Social categories of respondent									Total	Percent
	So called Untouchable caste groups (Dalit)			So called High Caste groups			Indigenous ethnic groups				
	Male	HH head women	Non-HH head	Male	HH head women	Non-HH head	Male	HH head women	Non-HH head women		
Wage labor /job	15	7	7	66	6	7	14	0	6	128	34.78
Land ownerships	23	8	2	19	9	2	17	4	6	90	24.46
Distribution of nutritious food	5	6	3	24	6	7	0	0	0	51	13.86
Eating practices	4	7	2	12	2	9	0	0	0	36	9.78
Share tenancy	11	4	1	3	2	3	7	0	0	31	8.42
Credit	3	6	2	9	7	1	1	0	3	32	8.70
Total	61	38	17	133	32	29	39	4	15	368	100

(Source: Focus Group Discussion, 2012); Note: Percentage in parenthesis; HH= Households

so-called high caste women. Land ownership has more concern with indigenous ethnic groups.

More importantly, findings from FGD and KII among women reveal that existing gender institutions even function rigidly in the region. The institution create constraint for women to find wage labor, employment, land ownerships, nutritious and sufficient food and credit which are responsible for production and exchange entitlement of women. Table 2 summarizes major institution determining the factors.

Lack of land ownership and share tenancy were major factors behind the failure of production entitlement of women in the study areas. These situations were found to be channelized through patrilinearity, patriarchal inheritance law, and cultural practices of farming and credit institutions. Siegmann and Sadaf (2004) and Koolwal (2007) opined that patri-linearity and son preference were major factors for land insecurity among women. They discussed that the son was entitled to pass the family name, represent insurance for parents in the old age and can carry out important rituals when they died. Therefore, he was entitled to own his parents property including land. The study found that those institutions were strict in the region because a son was a crucial capital for the parents as he was a potential remittance earner which was major source of income and livelihoods in such resource poor areas. A son was also perceived as a person who was able to work in harsh local environmental conditions. As a consequence, there were only 6 percent women who owned land in the study sites while the national average is 10.5 percent. Also, the average size of land owned by a women was just one-tenth than that of an average male holding while it was two third of the national average.

But the finding shows that the issue of land ownership was different for different caste groups. It was more important for high caste and indigenous women who was the head of their houses, as a result of migration or death of her spouse. Because of limited land entitlement they were unable to get credit from banks and purchased agricultural inputs required for them for food production. They used more compost manure than those used by male headed households. Also, they were able to use land as they wish. They produced agricultural crops which were consumed at household level.

The issue of share tenancy was major factor for Dalit household head because these households were mostly landless. Dalit women were not able to get land for share cropping in the context of its scarcity. They were perceived that they were not able to manage agricultural inputs. In addition, similar to previous finding cultural restrictions on women to perform some agricultural activities such as ploughing, spraying and irrigation blocked their farming ability (Kabeer, 1990, p. 1). They needed to depend on men for ploughing, driving tractors, and running irrigation machine. Only a woman who had son or sons at working age of 13 or above, she would have a chance of getting land in tenancy for share cropping. However, it was regularized pattern among Dalit and the poor of the areas that most of sons, just after reaching the working age, accompany with their fathers for work to India.

There were many earlier writing that earning ability of women established her entitlement to market food (Sen, 1981; Agrawal, 1994; Kabeer 1999). The informal wage system was the major cause that limited the choice of women's earning options. It was general practice in Nepal that women were remunerated half than that paid to male wage worker though they played roughly equal role in labor inputs to agricultural production (UNDP, 2009; WFP, 2010). Nevertheless, in the study areas 90 percent of women worker particularly Dalit were forced to work as unpaid due to scarcity of cash. In turn there were practices of labor exchange system called '*Parma*' which limited her income earning opportunities. In addition, certain work such as ploughing land was culturally prohibited to a woman which was well remunerated wage work in the area. Social discrimination such as practices of untouchability with Dalit blocks capability of low caste women to earn. Hotel business and sale of milk in nearby market was emerging as a new livelihoods option for women in the area. However, the Dalit women were not allowed, in practice, to sell milk and water based products because they were untouchable. Also, there was practice that male went to work if there was provision of pay in cash. As a result, more male were benefiting from 'cash for work' programme of WFP while more female were from 'food for work'.

Allendorf (2007) stated that education played sustainable role for food security. In the region, education and skills

**Table 2: Major institution affecting women's production and exchange entitlement**

Factors	Major institutions	Impacts
Land ownership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Patereniliaty/son on preference</li> <li>• Patriarchal inheritance law</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Barrier to get credit for household head women</li> <li>• Limitation to farm priority products for non-head high caste women.</li> </ul>
Share tenancy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural practices of farming</li> <li>• Barriers to plough the land to household head women</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Barriers to get credit to household women</li> <li>• Limited food production for women household head</li> </ul>
Wage/employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Labour exchange system (<i>Perma</i>)</li> <li>• Minimum wage</li> <li>• Patrilocal/early marriage</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low education status</li> <li>• Limitation on income opportunities</li> <li>• Reduction in purchasing power</li> <li>• Labor exploitation</li> </ul>
Credit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sanction of male</li> <li>• Land tenure</li> <li>• Kin relations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Barriers to purchase food from market to household women</li> <li>• Limitation on use of agricultural inputs</li> </ul>
Distribution of nutritious food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food discrimination</li> <li>• <i>Chhaupadi</i> system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Barriers to get nutritious food</li> <li>• Malnutrition</li> <li>• Low level of health status</li> </ul>
Eating practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women eating at last</li> <li>• Women eating left-over</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inadequate food consumption</li> </ul>

among girls were limited due to the institutions of patrilocal. Girls at younger age were demanded as a working labor so as she married early than her considerable age. The rate of leaving schools during high school was found highest in the study sites. Also, to cope with male outmigration, the child girls were dropped from school limiting their future as an income earner.

Women particularly among high caste groups were not given animal products such as milk, curd, meat during their menstruation cycle, pregnancy and breast feeding right when they need nutritious food. It showed that 5 days in every month at least they were not allowed to eat nutritious food during menstruation cycle. In addition, women were discriminated after giving birth of her child. If she gave birth of son, her husband and father in-law celebrate the events slaughtering goat and provide enough food she needed. If she gave birth of daughter, they neglected her and gave less nutrition food such as the chapatti of millet.

As previous finding of Harriss (1983) and Shively *et al.* (2011) the practice of eating at the last and left over also existed still in practice but particularly among Dalit community. All women particularly among Dalit groups ate left over by their husband. In the area, the youngest daughter in-law distributed food in home and she ate at the last. During food shortage periods when there was no harvest and processing of food (January-February, August-September) almost all households from all caste groups carried on these practices. In that time two types of food prepared in the houses of the poor; one type was made from fine grains which were for parents and son and other type was made by coarse grains such as maize and barley which were for daughter in-law and daughter. During the work in field, landlord gave chapatti of wheat if the wage labor was male while he gave chapatti of millet if the worker was female.

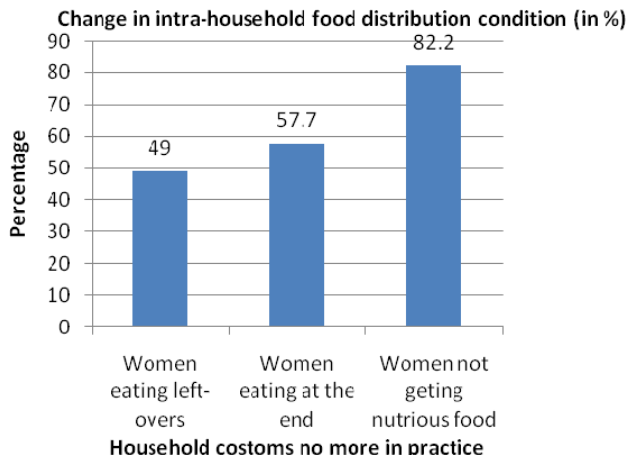
**Changing practices:** The study observed changing patterns in gender institution in aggregate terms and women's production, access and consumption entitlement. Women's

ownership in land had been increasing in recent days. Major factor behind the situation was that the Government of Nepal provided incentive of 30 percent reduction in registration fee if the land was registered in the name of female. Women from high caste *Thakuri* family in hills and *Brahmin/ chhetry* family in Terai were benefiting from this provision. As women and their male counterparts from these social groups were educated, to save registration fee they register land in the name of women occurred though their inheritance and purchase. Such women were also increasing opportunities for the employment because of improving education status among them and having good social networks with state mechanism.

At a time, there were also some changes in household customs of food distribution. Out of total women respondent 49, 57.7 and 82.2 percent replied that there was no more the practice of eating left over, at the last and not getting nutritious food in the home respectively (Chart-2). However, there was different pattern of changes among women from different social groups. The practices of eating at the last and left over were significantly changing among high caste women. The study found that in more than 50 percent of houses particularly in Dalit there were practices of eating residue. These practices were related with scarcity of food at home. As Dalit were more food insecure than those of high caste, these practices were still exist among them.

Food discrimination during the menstruation cycles was still in practices among high caste while it was slightly changing among Dalit community. Dalit community were seemed some flexible to follow the rule while high caste female pursued the rule strictly. However, there was significant change among high caste families in the practice of not giving nutritious food such as vegetable, pulses and meat in other time.

Women's self help groups were playing crucial role to change the institutions. There were at least one such groups in each settlement. These groups were supported by Maoist during their war to raise their voice and punish who



Graph 1: Change in intra-household food distribution practices

practiced discrimination with women in distribution of food. The groups had also been raising their voices against the discriminatory practices. They implements matching fund, saving and credit programme and empowerment programme though the support of donor agencies and NGOs. The matching fund increased the access of women in credit in some extend. Through the fund, the access of women in market to purchase food and pay the credit increased. As they get loan in fixed turn, they were able to convince traders to give food in credit. Women, who had land, use the money to purchase improved seed and chemical fertilizer. Some women started to cultivate cash crops such as vegetable and fruits. Now, they had opportunity to sell these products in local markets.

The wage of women in non-agricultural work had increased in recent days. World Food Program (WFP) conducted Cash For Work (CFW) had promoted equal wages for male and female worker in food aid work. This had created positive impacts on the wage system in other non-agricultural sectors such as construction of road, building, school, etc. Now, women wage worker got equal wages with male in non-agricultural work for similar activities they perform.

Market had been playing crucial role to break down the traditional patron-client relationship between high caste and low caste groups by which Dalit women were particularly benefitting. Previously, Dalit worked for high caste families in turn they got grain. It was argued that with the very limited grain the patrons exploit the labor of low caste groups. As collecting of grain was women's major work, they were also forced to buy or receive grain in credit from her patrons. Now, Dalit women purchased food from local market from remittances. They had strong relationship with market but the exploitative relationship with patron had been losing.

## CONCLUSIONS

Women and young girls living in resource scarce areas were more vulnerable to hunger during food-scarce periods because gender based institutions functions rigidly in such area and time causing the failure of their food entitlement. However, the study found that the impacts of these

institutions differ based on women's position in home, caste and ethnicity of women. The institutions of land tenure caused negative impacts on the production ability of a high caste women household head. Gender based food distribution discrimination practices had tremendous impacts on food availability for women belonging to caste based groups while the practices had no impacts on women from indigenous ethnic groups because they did not have such practices. Within caste based groups, food discrimination during the menstruation cycle had more impacts on high caste women while eating at the last had impacts on Dalit women. Many literatures focused that land tenure to women was a precondition for enhancing the production entitlement of women. However, the study found that the land tenure were not the issue of vulnerable groups such as Dalit of Nepal. There were needs of promoting their skills that increased their chance of getting wage and other labor based employment opportunities. Also, there were needs of removing the institutional barriers such as *Parma* system to get equitable wages at local level. Simultaneously, there was need of institutions and infrastructure which removed the traditional gender bias and also decreased the work load of household head women. Remittances were major source of income of single women in the study sites. The remittances in the region were sent through people. Women faced difficulties to get full amount on time sent by her spouse because the bringer uses the money for duration of time without information. There was need of creating the institution such as IME by which women got remittances directly. In addition, Women's social groups were playing crucial role for their empowerment and food security of women in remote parts of Nepal. These groups needed to divert towards rural economic institutions such as cooperative or micro-credit bank. The groups needed to support financially by which they could provide credit to women in the lowest interest rate.

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